

## FEATURE

# Veteran pilot who flew in three wars visits Daedalians

By Lt. Col. Ed Memi  
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With more than 38 years in the Air Force, retired Lt. Col. Bill Page described his career as "unusual, but interesting" as he spoke with about 50 members and guests of the Swamp Fox Flight of the Order of Daedalians, a group of commissioned pilots who intend to make aviation a career, Aug. 24 at the Charleston Club.

Page, a Fort Walton, Fla. resident, fought in World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and amassed more than 15,000 hours in 54 different aircraft, from the P-38 to the F-4 Phantom II. He served three combat tours in Vietnam alone. Page speaks before audiences, mostly Reserve Officer Training Corps detachments, about 8 to 10 times a year and wears his World War II uniform, with 48 ribbons, at the annual Daedalian National convention. He's been a Daedalian member since 1972.

"I've been very fortunate to have what I would describe as a very unique career, probably because I started in a way most people didn't," Page said. "They lowered the draft age in 1942 and I was not old enough. I had a fake birth certificate and got myself drafted when I was 15 years old."

"I got sent to field artillery at Fort Sill, Okla., and was put into pack artillery, where they were training guys to haul 75 mm howitzers with a mule," said Page. "One day I was shoveling manure in a stall with this older guy who was a college graduate. I had finished 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He leaned on my shoulder and said, 'Page, do you like doing this?' And I said 'How can anybody like doing this?' He said, 'Let's go take the cadet exam and learn how to fly airplanes.' We went down and took the 150-question test that was designed to see if you could assimilate two years of college, which was the norm back then. I made a 125.



Lt. Col. Ed Memi

Retired Lt. Col. Bill Page



courtesy photo

Retired Lt. Col. Bill Page flew the A-1 Skyraider (above) and other planes.

He made a 68 and didn't qualify," Page laughed.

Page said that was what made him a pre-cadet and they shipped him off to Arizona State Teacher's College, "where there were 500 students, 490 of them were women."

"I struggled through primary, basic and advanced flying school and finally got to fly the RP-322, which was a stripped down P-38. I think the idea then was that this guy was going to kill himself, so let's just put him in an airplane that he can't take anybody with him."

Although Page preferred to fly fighters, he was eventually sent to Greenville, S.C., checked out in the B-25 and then given a crew.

"I didn't know what a crew was back then and you'd love the way we chose our crews," said Page. "They drew numbers to see whom they would get to pick for their crewmembers. I drew number 19 (a high number) and there were only a few left when I got my chance to pick. Fortunately, I got a good flight engineer because his wife was having a baby and he was out of the room when everyone was picking crewmembers. He was the guts of my crew."

"We were so bad that we went down one day to Fort Myers, Fla., on a daylight cross country and we were coming back and there were clouds below us and we didn't know where we were. Those were in the days when we didn't have all the fancy navigating stuff that we have nowadays. I asked the navigator where we were and he didn't have a clue. We dove down under the overcast clouds and there were no lights. The navigator said we were over some swamp and I was stupid enough to believe him. So we climbed up back through the clouds and he gave me a heading change further northeast. It ended up that we were out over the Atlantic and we ran out of gas over Florence, and I didn't make it back to Greenville. That's the kind of crew that I had. It was sporty to head out to the Pacific with a crew like that and we

missed every island on the way out.

"After island hopping across the Pacific, we landed at an island that was under attack. The island was under bombardment by some Betty bombers, so we landed, jumped out of the airplane and into a ditch, and then saw our airplane destroyed."

He eventually got back to flying P-38s, volunteered for a second tour and was put back into B-25s again.

"I hated the idea, but it turned out to be great because they were strafers, they could fly at treetop level and there was not much of a fighter mission in Japan in those days," said Page. "The Japanese air force had been pretty much destroyed, so it turned out to be a great assignment. I was volunteering for everything that came down the road and I was racking up combat points in those days. I got hit a lot and everybody used to call me the magnet."

During the Korean War, he was assigned as an air installation officer, equivalent to today's base civil engineers, and he had to "beg, borrow and steal to go flying." He flew in C-47s and some Forward Air Control missions in T-6s.

Page was sent to Europe in 1956 and ended up at a C-119 Troop Carrier Base and had never seen or flown one.

"The colonel that was interviewing me said that my records showed that I had no C-119 time and asked what was I doing here," said Page. "I said, 'Colonel, I haven't the foggiest idea.' He sent me on a C-119 trip going to Brussels to haul some engines and said that an instructor pilot was going and he'd let you fly the airplane. 'When you get back, you can let me know if you want to fly the C-119 or the C-47', he said."

"My first clue that something was wrong was when I asked the IP what something was up in the wheel well and he said he didn't know."

"When we got to the end of the runway and he backed up so the tail was hanging over the overrun and gave me instructions that

when we get to the 2,000 foot remaining marker, help me abort if we are not airborne by then. It just seemed like forever that the plane inched forward and when we got to the marker, he yelled at me to help me pull this SOB up and that was my introduction to Troop Carrier Command. When we got back, I became a C-47 pilot."

One of the most interesting things in his career was getting involved in Special Operations in Southeast Asia.

"I did fly the F-4 and F-105 in Southeast Asia and flew the A-1s, which was probably the best mission over there," said Page. "I flew mostly Vietnamese A-1s."

He was assigned in Vietnam in 1960, then again in 1962 and went back for a third tour in 1968.

"My best job in the Air Force was as the director of Air Operations at Military Assistance Command Special Operation Group (in Saigon, South Vietnam)," said Page. "We hired mercenaries and had a lot of strange people working for us over there. We had all the 'black' C-130s with Fulton arresting gear and had 'black' C-123s with jet pods on them."

"We had a Vietnamese squadron of A-1s, which I favored a lot and flew. Also, we had a Vietnamese squadron of HH-34 helicopters and they would hang it out and go into Cambodia just as far as they could go. I had the only Huey gunships in Southeast Asia at Cam Ranh Bay. We used Army helicopters to do inserts into the jungle and we did a lot of agent work in North Vietnam. We just did a lot of interesting things like go into the jungle and work with the Green Berets."

"We had our own Air Force, Navy fast PT boats that we ran up the coast and it was a great, great experience all around. It was a completely different kind of war."

Page then spent 10 years in the Inspector General business and retired from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, in 1982.

His advice to the younger people was, "If I had to do it all over again, I would not change many things, but as my dad used to say to me, don't do what I do, do what I say to do. So to the young guys in the crowd, I say get all the education that you can since we are in an era of high technology. I've been playing catch up my whole career, started with props and ended up with jets. I had to really struggle. It took me forever to get a college degree, going at night and eventually attended eight different colleges before I got my degree. It's so important to keep your education going, especially in this age of high technology."